

James 1:26 February 14, 2007

Alright – good morning. Let's get our Bibles out and go back to the book of James this morning. I'll tell you – I was studying last Tuesday night for this sermon and just looked at Nicole and said – I'm beginning to think James doesn't want me to have any friends. Over & over again he has been blunt and honest and practical and at least for me, all too personal.

Today again, where most authors or preachers or just people would have left it in the vague or superficial to avoid awkwardness and trust the hearer to make application, James goes right for the bottom-line in words none of us can afford to ignore. Let's take a look – we'll go ahead and read both **26 and 27**.

If anyone thinks he is religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Through these verses are obviously linked, there is just too much for us to handle at one time, so we'll deal with 26 today and wrap up 27 next week.

When we hear James say "if anyone thinks himself religious..." many of us automatically think in negative terms. We've all heard it said, or maybe even have said it ourselves, "Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship." And there's some truth in that. But if that's the way we are thinking, we are not going to understand what James is saying here.

Because he's not speaking negatively about religion. Notice, he says in the very next verse, "pure and faultless religion is this..." To James, there is true religion and there is false religion. There is worthless religion and there is pure and faultless religion. There is real religion that pleases God and there is counterfeit religious activity that only pleases men.

The word **religious (threskos)** appears only here in the New Testament, though its root word threskia is found elsewhere. It can refer to both the inner and outer qualities of worship; generally however, as here, it **points to external ceremonies or practices of worship**.

So really you could read this verse: is there anyone who thinks he's devout? Is there anyone who thinks he is right with God? Is there anyone who thinks he is really serious about following Christ? Is there anyone who thinks he is a Christian?

And **the intent of the text is to encourage us towards true expressions of authentic worship**.

If we are going to move in that direction, the first thing that we must accept is that it is possible to think that you are religious, to think that you have true religious expressions of worship, but to be deceived. And in your deception you are offering what you think is worship but what is in fact not authentic worship. That is what the text tells us: If anyone considers himself to be religious, and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself...

The primary problem with deception is that when you are deceived you do not know that you are deceived. For if you knew you were deceived you would no longer be deceived. Remember, the goal of his message is to move us toward truer expressions of authentic worship. So, in order to do that, **we must all accept the possibility that in our belief that we are religious, meaning we think we are making true expressions of worship, we might be deceived and not know it**.

If we can accept that possibility then we can accept that James is talking to us. He's talking to you. I mean you are here at church. You study your Bibles. Some of you came to Sunday School. Well,

here in our text it is as if James is saying, "You think you are religious, well let's give your religion a test. Let's hold it up and examine it to see whether it is true or false.

These verses are not meant to answer: what must I do to be saved? But instead: what will I do if I am saved? They are not: how can I be saved? This is: how can I know if I am saved? **James is giving us tests to evaluate the reality of our faith. He's asking you the question: "Is your religion real?"**

And the ever-practical James in verses 26 and 27 gives us three specific tests to help us determine whether our religion is the real thing or just empty worthless self-deception. This morning we'll just look at the first.

Are you in control of your speech?

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

To paraphrase James: If you think that you are a Christian and yet you are not in control of the way that you speak you are fooling yourself and your Christianity is fake, it's worthless.

Why? Because you don't control your tongue!

Pay careful attention to that word **worthless**. It means **empty**. It describes something that fails to **achieve its goal**. What's the goal of religious activity? It should be to please God. But James is saying if you are not in control of your tongue, all your religious activity fails to achieve its primary purpose.

God is concerned about how you communicate! There is a kind of speech that pleases God and there is a kind of speech that He hates. And if you profess to love God but continually practice that which He hates, your profession doesn't mean much.

James is not talking about periodic struggles, but a continual pattern. He's not talking about a snap-shot of your life, but the video. We know that because over in chapter 3:2, James says "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."

None of us are perfect, so there will be times when our speech does get out of control, but the question we do need to ask if we want to know whether our religion is real or not is what is the characteristic pattern of our lives? Are we progressively growing in our ability to speak the way God desires, or is our way of communicating characterized by a lack of control?

The NIV says keep a tight rein. The NAS says "does not bridle his tongue." A bridle is what? It along with the bit is something that is used to control a wild animal. The picture James paints is of an unruly animal that needs to be kept under control. Obviously James is not speaking literally here. The tongue represents the way we speak, and the bridle self-control.

Now James doesn't go into great detail as to exactly what an out of control tongue looks like; he'll get into that more in chapter 3 and chapter 4. The stress in this verse is just on the fact that it is untamed.

Let's take a minute and look at how Scripture describes an out of control tongue – because this issue is important in James and because our hearts are so deceptive – and we need to know if our tongues are untamed – if our religion is real – because our future hangs on it.

Is your tongue out of control?

Are you mean? Look at James 3:8-10.

Our tongues are out of control when we use them to be nasty – to just be mean to others. And how incredibly common a mean tongue is among us who claim to be believers. James paints a picture of a Christian who one moment is praising God and cursing men the next. Doing a quiet time and then yelling at his kids, singing praise songs in church and then yelling at his neighbor or the car in front of him.

The word for curse here doesn't refer to profanity – it describes personal abuse – a kind of speech that results from losing your temper. This is beating up others with your words.

So do your words hurt others? Do you use your speech as a weapon? Do you say unkind things about other people? Don't deceive your own heart, that's a sign you have an unbridled tongue. Everyone can fall in this area, but if you continually and repeatedly and characteristically abuse others with your speech, that is a good indicator that your tongue is out of control.

Are you hyper-critical – look at James 4:11.

To speak against your brother is literally to speak down on him – you don't care about his good, you are out to get him and you use words to do it. To speak against your brother is to constantly find faults with him. Are you an expert at finding the problems of others and pointing them out without mercy?

James isn't saying we aren't to rebuke others in their sin, what he is saying is that we are not to set ourselves up as judge and jury and speak to others without mercy or love. Think about the conversations you had yesterday, what did you spend most of your time talking about? If you are picking others apart, speaking down on others, if that characterizes your speech, that's a good sign your tongue is out of control.

Is your speech sick? Turn to Ephesians 4:29.

The word unwholesome means putrid, sick, and infected. This is any kind of speech that is unhealthy, unproductive, corrupt, harmful or destructive. Words that purposefully hurt others or tear them down. What's wholesome speech – it's good for edification – for lifting up – helping others grow – it's according to the need at the moment. Do the words that pour of your mouth put others at ease or in stress? Do they bring smiles or cringes? Do they create conflict unnecessarily? If you are constantly characterized by this kind of speech, that's an indicator that your tongue is untamed.

Are you a dirty talker? Look at Ephesians 5:4.

Filthy talk is dirty speech, degrading, and disgraceful, obscene speech. Silly talk is gutter talk, literally moronic speaking. Coarse jesting is suggestive, dirty joking. Do you continually talk about dirty things? That is a characteristic of out of control speech.

Are you a liar? Look at Colossians 3:9.

Lies are part of the sinful self – the old you before Christ made you a new creation. Christians are to be truth tellers. If it's the pattern of your life to bend the truth, exaggerate the truth, twist the truth, and tell lies – you could not only be deceiving others, you could be deceiving yourself because your tongue is out of control.

Do you gossip? Look at Proverbs 16:28.

Gossip is constantly speaking about others in a negative way behind their back. You have a problem with someone else and instead of going directly to them, you take the coward's way out and you just harp on them with your family and say negative things about them to your friends. If you are continually gossiping and slandering others, you need to check your profession of faith – it's a sign of an untamed tongue.

You want to know if your religion is real? Check the way you talk. Is your tongue out of control? Are you mean, do you talk poorly of others, are you constantly finding fault, do you tear down, are you abusive, are you coarse, are you deceptive, do you gossip?

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

That's the first test.

Now you might be a little surprised that James begins this way – I mean we began by asking “Is your religion real?” – and as Geoff Thomas said, “You expected thunder and lightning, mystery & ecstasy, and instead you get a word about self-control. True religion is keeping a tight rein on your tongue, says James. It is much more than that, but without that there is no true Christianity.”

So why start here? **Three reasons why this test is important:**

1) We all talk. This is a great test of us today because it is so easy to apply. No matter what you do every day, this is one thing you do all day long. You talk. From the bedroom to the bathroom to the kitchen to the classroom, the boardroom, the car, the store, the wherever – we talk. It's what humans do and almost without thought of how important it is to human life. Some people have said that men speak 25 thousand words a day and women speak 30 thousand – now I don't know who counted that up but regardless, **since we all communicate and Jesus is to be Lord over the whole of our lives, how we talk on a regular basis is a very convenient way to test whether Jesus is really Lord over our lives or not.**

2) We generally fail to realize the importance of how we talk. James chooses an issue that all of us deal with but most of us ignore. See hypocrites are serious about religious activity – they work hard at cleaning up the outside, but most often hypocrites don't pay much attention to how they talk. They would never murder, but they don't mind murdering someone with their speech. This is a great test because frankly for most of us it is easy to put on your Sunday suit and go to church and sing the songs, - **it is easy to go through the motions of “church” but it is very difficult to speak in a way that honors God throughout the week.**

The reason we pursue a life that is changed by belief into behavior is that any religious practice that cannot influence the heart and therefore our actions is worthless.

Again, Geoff Thomas notes, “The basic principle at stake is self-control. That is how real genuine religion shows itself. But the phrase 'self-control' is rather vague, and we will all nod our agreement about a concept like self-control. James knows that it is crucial to bring our emotions and our affections under the word of God, and so he seizes on something alive and vivid to arouse our consciences - our words. The barometer of our self-control is how we are guarding and controlling our tongues.”

3) Ultimately what it comes down to – why this is a good test of the worth of our religion – **is that how you talk reveals what is in your heart.** Jesus explains this in **Matthew 12:33-37** – let's look at it together.

What you characteristically speak reveals what? It reveals what is in your heart!

Listen:

Why does a person continually gossip? Because he is proud and self-righteous in his heart. He thinks he is better than others. When you gossip you are saying something significant about your heart.

Why do you pick on others and say mean things to them? Something is wrong in your heart.

Why do you tell perverted jokes and speak about things which are dirty? Because you have a perverted heart and your mind is filled with things which are dirty. Don't deceive yourself. Don't say I am really a kind person when you continually say mean things. Don't say I really am a loving person when you are continually gossiping about others. Don't say I am really a humble person when you are continually saying proud things. Don't say I really love God when you are continually complaining about what He is doing in your life. Don't say I really am religious when your speech is entirely out of control. Your heart is connected to your mouth and so what you speak about reveals what is going on in your heart. **If you have word problems that means you have heart problems. That is why this test is such a great one. If your tongue is not controlled by God then it is a sure indicator that your heart is not.** The only way to have control over your tongue is to be transformed by the gospel.

As you examine your speech and discover problems, remember, to overcome them you need to deal with your heart. There is hope for you. You can learn to control your tongue. But you've got to get first things first. You'll never be able to tame your tongue until you submit to Christ as Lord. Paul says in Romans 6 that before God saves a person he is a slave to sin. You can't loose yourself from those chains. Only Christ can. The tongue can be controlled, but only by His grace. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ that you might be saved. Stop trying to serve two masters. Submit yourself to Christ's rule.

If you are a true believer this morning, your life isn't marked by an out of control tongue, but you do see periodic struggles with this difficult issue, ask yourself what does your speech reveal about your heart?

As you do, find hope in the grace of God. Thank Jesus Christ that He came that you might be forgiven and cleansed and purified from sins like the ones we've mentioned this morning. You can speak self-controlled words. And let His great love for you challenge you to be more and more devoted to speaking and communicating in a way that honors Him.

Today as we sing in a moment, the altar is open if you want to come and pray and I'll be down front if need to make any decision for Christ.

James said - "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

Please don't leave this morning content with a worthless religion.

Let's pray.